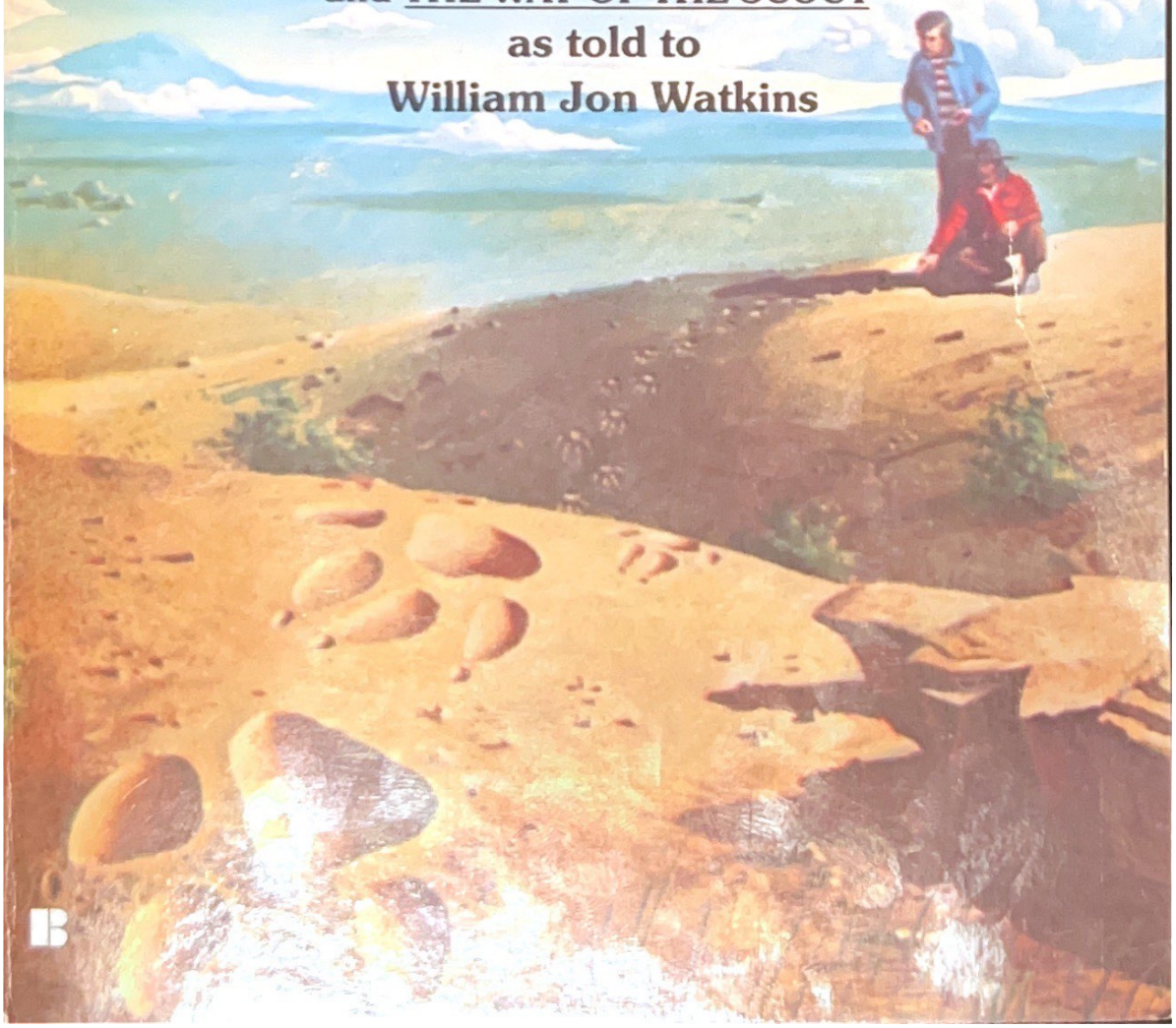
The most powerful and magical high spiritual adventure since **The Teachings of Don Juan**

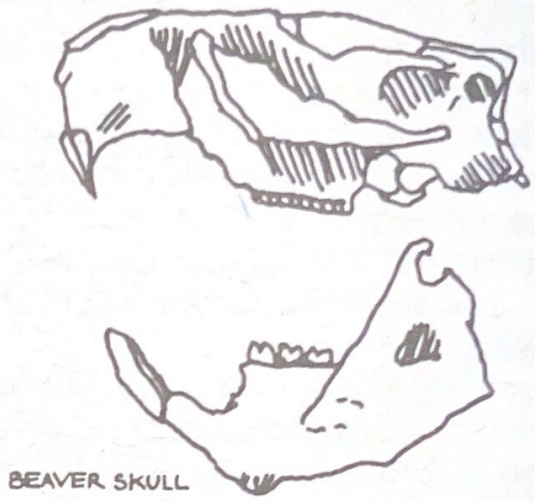
THE TRACKER

The true story of

TOM BROWN, Jr.

Author of AWAKENING SPIRITS
and THE WAY OF THE SCOUT
as told to
William Jon Watkins





BEAVER SKULL

1/The Ultimate Track

The first track is the end of a string. At the far end, a being is moving; a mystery, dropping a hint about itself every so many feet, telling you more about itself until you can almost see it, even before you come to it. The mystery reveals itself slowly, track by track, giving its genealogy early to coax you in. Further on, it will tell you the intimate details of its life and work, until you know the maker of the track like a lifelong friend.

The mystery leaves itself like a trail of breadcrumbs, and by the time your mind has eaten its way to the maker of the tracks, the mystery is inside you, part of you forever. The tracks of every mystery you have ever swallowed move inside your own tracks, shading them slightly or skewing them with nuances that show how much *more* you have become than what you were.

Man goes through the world eating his mysteries. I

have followed every mystery I could in the twenty years since I began my apprenticeship with an old Apache tracker named Stalking Wolf. I have had no choice in this. Mysteries are irresistible to me, and a trail is something that *must* be followed until it gives up its secret or puts me onto the trail of something even more amazing. Tracks fascinate me.

I watch my own tracks constantly. They go like a dog with a curious nose always catching scent of something unidentifiable hovering just out of reach. If I go to the store for milk, my trail winds a quarter of a mile to go a block and a half. Even in a small New Jersey town, the landscape is as full of invisible animals as a child's puzzle.

One winter after a moderate snow, I went out to get milk and found the track of a small gray bird called a Junco. I like the silhouette of the Junco; its head rounds so smoothly into its back that it looks like it ought to be made out of chrome. Birds are always mysteries. They leave their track in the air most of the time and I don't have the nose to follow it. Their tracks on the ground were irresistible.

I crouched down and looked at them, judging the size and shape of the prints to get the type of bird. I watched its ease of movement on the ground and knew it wasn't a finch or a sparrow. The tracks went from seed to seed in an easy zig-zagging line. Looking close I could see where the bird had stopped and leaned a little to one side, breaking down the side of its print while it ducked and then craned its head up. I saw where it gave a little defensive hop as something that seemed threatening must have gone by overhead.

The movement from a hop to a better balanced stance said there had been danger. The way the toes went into the snow and curled under told me that more weight had been forward on the foot, as it would have been if the bird were ducking its head and then swiveling it to look up.

I had learned what track is made by that gesture the only way it can be learned, by watching a similar bird do a similar thing on the ground and then going over to see

what the track looked like. By doing this time after time with bird after bird, animal after animal, person after person, I became a tracker.

Since I began tracking at the age of eight, I have never seen a track being made without wanting to go over and examine it. With each track I add a little information to what I have been able to gather so far. Bit by bit, I learn to track more completely the mystery at the end of every track.

The tracks painted in the living picture of a bird, a picture indistinct at first but clearer with every track, until I could see the small, sleek, gray head swiveling, swiveling as he picked up the seed and looked for cats, dogs, children, cars, birds after his prize, and bigger, hungrier things looking for an easy meal. His tracks hopped forward and I could see, as I crouched, the brushings of his wings in the snow as he took off. He was gone from the ground, but I could still see him in my mind, darting through the air. I looked in a straight line for the most prominent tree and walked toward it.

Juncoes do not waste time cruising for bugs or soaring around sightseeing. They live the pragmatic life of the straight line. They go right down into the jaws of sudden death, down onto the ground, and live by their wits and their prudence. Birds are a delicacy on almost every predator's menu, and when the Junco lands, he hops around watching and watching, pecking and dropping half of what he pecks at because his head comes back up so fast to see what's after him next.

I brushed the pecked and dropped seeds aside. With a mouthful, he had gone flapping off toward the tree, and when I got to it, there were seeds at the foot of the tree that were like the ones where he had taken off. There was a fresh dust of snow around the seeds and beneath some of them, where he had knocked snow down off the branch as he landed.

He must have felt safe sitting there ten feet above half the things that would like to eat him. He must have known that he was hard to see in the trees and that the hawks would rather take him flying anyway. A fleeing

animal is a vulnerable animal, and every carnivore in the forest likes an easy kill.

When he changed the position of the seeds in his gullet, he dropped some of them down over the snow that had fallen from the branch. There were hop marks where he had come down to get the dropped seeds later, but the fact that there was a fine dusting of snow on some of the seeds indicated that he had probably come to that branch before to swallow what he had grabbed from the ground.

There were other hop marks under the snow dust when I blew it away, and they seemed to have the same jittery prudence that the other tracks had had. Of course, I knew the bird, I had seen it around my own feeder. Every species has its specific behaviors, but every individual performs them differently. They're as unalike as people.

I recognized the jittery little tremors, the half steps thought about but left untaken. I had gone out and examined his other tracks after I had watched him one day from my window. I could see him pecking and ducking in that jittery, cocky style of feeding that was as individual as a human gait. I checked how the lighter dust of snow from his takeoff had scattered behind him. I checked where it had fallen in relation to the other fall, and I guessed that either the wind had been drifting in that direction or the bird had taken off in the opposite direction sending the branch back and down as it left and dusting the snow further out than the first fall.

Since it was all I had to go on, I went as I had been taught from the track to the trail, looking far ahead to see where it might be going. I could read the identity from the individual print, but I needed the context in which the trail occurred to make sense of it entirely. The bird was feeding, the branch fall indicated he had flown in the direction of my house, and when I walked back there, I found that same jittery Junco near my own feeder. I sat down to watch him pecking-watching-pecking-watchingpeckingwatching-pecking-watching, until someone finally came out of the house and asked me where the milk was.

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I was fascinated with nature even before Stalking Wolf taught me to track, but my nature-watching was limited by the necessity of sitting and waiting for a long time in a place where we hoped something might happen. Stalking Wolf gave me the tools to track the mystery to its source. He taught me how to teach myself. I have been using the tools he gave me ever since.

Stalking Wolf was an Apache tracker. He had come to New Jersey to be near his son who was stationed there. His grandson, Rick, was my best friend, and Stalking Wolf taught both of us how we could teach ourselves to track, to stalk, to live in the woods, and to survive there. He gave us the questions that would lead us to our answers, but he never told us an answer. He taught me to see and to hear, to walk and to remain silent; he taught me how to be patient and resourceful, how to know and how to understand. He taught me to see invisible things from the trail that all action leaves around itself. He taught me how to teach myself the mystery of the track.

Since Stalking Wolf began teaching me, I have worked every day of my life at learning more and more about nature and about tracking. What I have learned was not easily learned, but anyone willing to take the time could do it. Most of the fundamental principles of how to track are in this book and anyone can learn them. Anyone willing to spend twenty years working diligently at it can learn the minute nuances of it as well. Stalking Wolf thought I had a gift for tracking. Anyone with a greater gift could probably learn the nuances in less time. After twenty years, I am still finding things in tracks that I have never seen before, and I do not believe I am in any danger of running out of discoveries.

School taught me how to read. Stalking Wolf taught me how to learn. I have been learning something every minute since, and there is no better way to unravel the mystery than to watch it move. But mysteries are by nature shy and secretive, and most often, the closest you get to them is the traces left behind by movement and

the disturbances left by action. I could not see the bird, but I could see the actions of the bird in the traces he left and in the disturbances made by his actions. I could see what was out of place since he had come and gone, the seeds where they did not grow, the tracks in the snow, the snow itself dusted down where it would not have been naturally. I could see the bird go through his routine almost as surely as if I had stood there watching him.

But a track is a temporary thing. Unless the mud goes suddenly hard and turns gradually to stone, tracks do not last. They fade, and as they dry, the wind sweeps them relentlessly level to ease its way across the ground. Tracks exist at the interface where the sky drags along the surface of the earth. They exist for a relatively brief time in a narrow level near the surface of the ground where the wind and the weather move across, changing the temperature and building information into the track. Wind pushes the tracks flat; rain tries to wash them away. Nature conspires to steal even the traces of passage. Most tracks made in the world go under unseen. I try to follow every one I can.

Each trail is one of a kind. The same combination of weather, land, temperature, and creature are probably duplicated no more often than snowflakes. The same interactions between so many variables probably never recur. Even within the easily identified, habitual gait of a person there are nuances made by the changing flux of emotions as he or she moved. The sheer variety of tracks is astounding; the amount that can be learned from them is irresistible.

Either by gift or by curse, I have a compulsion to know more about nature. I can never get enough. Everything I learn makes me see how much more there is to know and how little time there is in a lifetime to learn it all. Stalking Wolf gave me the tools I needed to pursue my curiosity, and I have been sharpening those tools ever since.

The vision of the world given me by Stalking Wolf has become a window into time. The more tracks I see, the clearer the picture of the animal becomes until I can

see him moving as he moved a minute, an hour, a month before I came along. When the tracks stop, I can still see the animal, how it paused, how it rested its body, where it put its paws. The animal is there before me almost real enough to touch, fixed in time by the impression of its track. I see from the track the motion of his feet, the motion of his body; I see the animal itself laying down the mystery of its coming and going.

Nothing makes this picture more vivid to me than a skull. When Rick and I found a skull, it kept us busy for days. We cleaned it, assembled it, drew it, and sketched the animal in around it. When we found a complete skeleton, scattered as it often was over hundreds of yards by the wild dogs, we were busy for weeks. Short of the animal itself making the tracks, nothing pleased us more than a skull.

A skull is the ultimate track a creature leaves. When everything else has been unshaped by time, when every scratch and print is gone, the skull remains. When I find a skull, it's as if I am standing within touch of the second greatest mystery in the universe, the mystery of where creatures go when they leave this greatest mystery of all, the pattern of life living itself, the visible design of the invisible that we call Nature.

The place where you lose the trail is not necessarily the place where it ends. A lost trail always extends beyond the evidence, and even the trails we find are only fragments of the trails that lie beyond our comprehension. When the bird left my feeder and flew, I could trail him only by inference, but his trail went on after I lost it, and I believe it goes beyond the skull as well, although I have no idea what it is like or how to follow it. Skulls simply mark the point of departure and the direction of flight, like the brush of a bird's wing in the snow.

I found my first skull in a swamp a mile or so from my house in Beachwood, right off the Toms River, in a place that is a marina and a parking lot now. It was only a pile of broken bones when I found it, but I took it home and fit the pieces together until I had the answer to what it was.

But every answer brings with it the inevitable question: *What has this thing got to do with everything else?* There is only one answer to that question but you have to find it out for yourself a little at a time over a lot of years. The question of what the bones made led me to the question of what kind of skull it was, and the answer to that question led to the question of how the animal had lived and where he fitted into the larger pattern of life.

I am still following the trail of questions that I picked up when I made that little pile of bones into a skull. This book is the story of that trail as I have come down it so far. It begins when I was seven. The pine trees came all the way down to the river then. The houses in even the most settled part of the Pine Barrens were few and far between. Outside Toms River they were scattered in little clumps or strung out at erratic intervals along roads made of hardpacked sand and gravel. There were not enough people in the entire Pine Barrens to make a decent size city. From Asbury Park to Trenton, from Camden to Cape May, larger than Grand Canyon National Park, stretched a wilderness of pitch pine and underbrush cut by an endless tangle of sand roads without names or numbers.

Along the roads, a few hundred native Pineys went back and forth between villages like Hog Wallow and New Egypt in old cars and trucks dying slowly from the assaults of foot-high bumps and axle-deep potholes. But they rarely got out of their cars. A hundred yards off any sand road, there is probably still a place where no human being has stood in a century.

But it's dangerous to go and look. The road sinks half a foot below the brush that packs the space between thirty foot pines, and a traveler who goes ten yards into the woods cannot look back and find the road again. About twice a year someone wanders into the Pine Barrens and dies trying to find their way out. Even the Pineys, whose families have lived in the Pine Barrens for more generations than any of them can remember, stick to the roads.

I always went *across* the roads, following deer runs,

making my own trails, running down any track I found. I have loved the woods as long as I can remember, and I have lived in them all my life. We lived in the fringes of the forest, just off the river, but my back door opened onto the wilderness. To me it was only my back yard. If my parents asked me where I was going, I always told them, "Just camping in the back yard." I meant it and it was true. But to me that back yard fanned out for hundreds and hundreds of square miles. I had to wander the Grand Tetons and go to California before I found the back fence.

I rarely told my parents what went on in the woods, and much of this book will probably come as a surprise to them; but I knew how much they worried about me, and I was afraid that any adventure I told them about might have frightened them into keeping me closer to home. Some of the things that happened to me would certainly have cost me my freedom if I had mentioned them, so I said nothing. The woods were my life and still are. I could not risk losing them. There were trails to follow there, and mysteries to be tracked down. Some callings cannot be ignored.

At first, I had only my curiosity and my *Golden Book of Nature* to guide me, but all that changed one day when I was walking along the river a short way down from my house. I was walking along the bank looking for fossils when I ran into a small but muscular, dark-haired boy doing the same thing. As far as I knew, I was the only one in New Jersey who had even the least interest in fossils or knew enough to go along the river bank looking for them.

I asked him what he was doing, and he said, "Looking for fossils." My heart started pounding. Finally, I had somebody to talk to! Somebody who could understand what I was saying and cared about it. We sat down on a log at the edge of the river around eight o'clock in the morning and began to talk about nature. By noon, we were colleagues, by three we were friends. Eventually, we were to become brothers.

There were places where our skills and knowledge overlapped, but more often than not, they com-

plemented each other. Rick, small, muscular, slim, was a better runner and a better stalker than I was. He had a knack for stalking, and he moved far more quietly than I did, even allowing for the difference in size. But I had a passion for tracking, and I was better at that. There was rarely any competition between us, and we were inseparable during the whole period of my training by his grandfather.

After we had talked through half the afternoon, Rick took me home with him to meet the man who would be my teacher and guide for the next nine years. I was in awe of Stalking Wolf from the beginning. He was of medium height and lean, like his grandson Rick, but his features were classically Indian. There were centuries of dead civilization in his face, and his eyes seemed to be looking at things very far away that distracted him. He seemed to be watching some complex totality that absorbed most of his attention.

It was years before I realized how far his perceptions extended, how much he saw in a glance, how much he heard, how incredibly much he *knew*. But it was clear from the instant I first met him that he knew more of what was worth knowing than anyone I would ever meet. Rick idolized him, and the longer I knew Stalking Wolf, the more I understood why.

Stalking Wolf was very old, and he drifted into reveries that made him seem as if he might be senile when I first met him. But I realized later, when I had seen with amazement how keen his senses were, that he had simply gone inside of himself for a moment to check his perceptions against the pattern of the world. Only after he had taught me how to be silent did I realize that he was stopping his own motion so he could tell the disturbances around him from his own.

It is a silence out of which the tracker listens for the scolding of birds deeper in the woods, or the sound that crackles the branches against the rustle of the wind. Only by silence and rapt attention can anyone hope to feel the ripples in the flow of life in the woods, which spread outward from an intrusion or a disturbance. The

scolding of a jay will put every bird within earshot on edge.

Birds are the lookouts of the woods; they spread local alarms. You can hear their cries going back and forth through the air like emergency calls. A man going through the woods churns up as much noise as he churns up landscape. All you have to do to hear it is be quiet and listen. Stalking Wolf's silences were the mark of his skill, the habit of a long practiced art. He was the grandson of a medicine man, and a tracker and hunter for his tribe. To Rick and me, he was the Spirit of the Woods. I believe that he trained us the way he himself had been trained as a child in the last years of the nineteenth century. He taught us a way of life which Rick and I tried to live by.

He was like an uncle who helps with the training of his brother's sons, aloof but affectionate, judgmental but secretly amused, gentle and harsh, guiding without directing. What he taught us permeated everything we did. He taught us to look for subtleties, for nuances, and we had to be quick to catch his hints.

I asked him once why he was so still at times, and he said, "To see better." I may have looked puzzled, but I didn't say anything because neither Rick nor I wanted Stalking Wolf to think we were stupid. Besides, we knew he would never give us the answer to anything directly. Usually, we said we understood and then went away and figured it out between ourselves. Then we went back to Stalking Wolf and told him what we had done and what had been the results. Stalking Wolf would either give his approval of what we had done or he would tell us we hadn't looked, or hadn't been as quiet as we thought we had.

Then he would give us a hint about what we should do to do whatever we did better, until we finally figured out a way that was workable for us. Without his guidance, we might have learned part of what we did learn, but it would have taken us ten times as long, and some of it we would never have gotten at all. He gave us information that would lead us on to the next step a bit at a time, and

he always waited until we had incorporated what we had learned before he nudged us toward something else.

Stalking Wolf led us out of childhood into a unique kind of manhood. We came to our skills as he had come to his, through a series of ideas and understandings that could only be gotten out of experience. He taught us to make use of everything, to live with the least disruption of the earth, to revere what we took from the woods, to master our fear, to hone our special skills sharper and sharper, to expand our senses and our awareness, to live in the space of the moment and to understand eternity.

I learned from Stalking Wolf a skill that could encompass everything I met. I learned to track, not animals or men, but disturbances, things knocked out of place, minute and indistinct traces, the ghost of a print, a stone turned wrong side up, a fragment of hair on a branch.

Stalking Wolf taught us how to be silent and watch what was going on. He had a special look that said he was giving us a hint to something that would seem obvious to us in a moment. When he saw that I didn't understand why he had to be silent to see better, he said, "Go feed the birds."

Rick and I immediately got some seed and went outside to feed the birds. Stalking Wolf came out and watched us and giggled into his hand. He looked away whenever we looked back to him for approval. We tossed the seed. We laid it down. We put it in piles. Nothing pleased him. Finally, he shook his head and went in.

Every time he saw me after that, he would ask me if I had learned to feed the birds yet. I said I didn't know how he wanted me to feed them. And he said, "How would you give food to me?"

He looked like he was going to burst out laughing at any instant, and I nodded and went away to look for Rick. When I found him I said, "How would you give food to your grandfather?" Rick was used to questions like that and he did not look at me as if I was crazy as someone else would have. We could not afford the luxury of being afraid to sound foolish. We burned for

answers, and we asked whatever questions came to mind without reservation. Neither of us ever laughed at the other for asking. "I'd hand it to him" he said finally.

I was afraid he was going to say that. "He wants us to hand the food to the birds, as if they're our friends." Rick said that maybe if we put some seed in our hands and sat very still, the birds might come down and take it. I reminded him that these were not park birds but wild ones, but Rick said that if Stalking Wolf wanted us to do it, it was probably no more impossible than all the other things we thought we could never do or understand.

It seemed like a good way to start anyway. We lay on the lawn with the seed in the palm of our hands and stayed as nearly motionless as we could all afternoon. A few birds came close to the ground while we were there, but none ever came within arm's reach. Toward dark, we gave up and came in. I shrugged at Stalking Wolf and said I guessed we weren't still enough. Stalking Wolf shook his head as if we were very foolish. "When should you feed your friends?" he said.

It took me a minute to realize what he meant, but the next morning long before dawn, Rick and I were lying in the dew-wet grass with our hands extended and our palms full of birdseed. We had perfected some measure of stillness from watching things in the woods, but this required not moving for hours, and it would have been far harder if we hadn't been as intent on it as we were.

The thought of feeding the birds like our brothers was a vision worth believing in. It made anything possible. In the middle of false dawn, the birds came awake and blasted the morning warning all over the woods. And in a while, a house sparrow swooped down and took a flying peck. Perhaps an hour of swooping passes later, one landed and pecked some seed from my hand. I could feel the tiny pinprick of its spurs digging into my finger. Then he cocked his head sidewards up my arm and looked directly into my eye. He blinked, shook a little bit, and took off again as if he was pretending that he hadn't seen me until he got out of reach.

They had been eating out of Rick's hand for ten

minutes. He was always more still than I was, but I could usually stay still longer. Some creatures approach according to how still you are, while others approach on the basis of how long you've been still. We learned to stalk what we tracked. We learned to survive in the woods problem by problem, until we could go alone into the woods with nothing but a knife and still survive.

More important, we learned a world view in which Nature is a being larger than the sum of all creatures, and can be seen best in the flow of its interactions. In the movement of each animal, all animals move. I am not sure if these were Stalking Wolf's own ideas or the ideas of his tribe, but Rick and I took them as articles of faith to live by, and we devoted our lives to living in the woods as much as we could and learning everything that was there. We spent most of the next nine years doing exactly that.

We lived on a mixture of what Stalking Wolf had told us and personal conjecture, which we believed to be the True Indian Way of Life. We worked toward this ideal in everything we did. Indian braves were always fit. We rowed, a heavy rowboat, against the tide in the Toms River and cut wood every day. Indian braves were trained as warriors. We took Kung Fu with a neighbor and practiced our kicks continually in front of the cabin we built in the Pines. The life we led kept us fit. Walking, running, crawling all day long, or sitting motionless as a tree for hours at a time waiting to see something miraculous toned us better than any planned system of exercises could have. And we tracked constantly once Stalking Wolf showed us how to learn the secrets. Before that, we watched.

We watched *Everything*: animals, birds, plants, insects, weather, sunlight, stars, fossils, people, hundreds of things. We watched the animals at first. We sat in swamps, in the woods, near lakes, by streams, along the river bank, any place an animal might live. And we waited. And waited. When we were lucky, we saw something special. When we didn't, we saw something else.

And then we learned about tracking. We tracked

everything that moved and some things that didn't. We tracked ourselves. We tracked other people. We tracked animals, cars, snails. We no longer had to wait for nature to come to us. Before we learned to track, our wandering had been guided only by the range of our memory. We went places we were familiar with. But once we could track, we could always backtrack ourselves if we got lost, and year by year our range increased.

From my literal back yard, we went deeper and deeper into the woods until, by the time we were sixteen, there was not a place in the Pine Barrens where I could be lost. We stayed away for longer and longer periods of time as our parents got used to our spending every spare moment studying nature. We kept up our schoolwork for the most part, and we stayed out of trouble, except for being continually late and forever out of reach. We were, if you don't count lies of necessity, model boys for that time and place.

Our tracking began when we were still eight. We found a huge paw print with claws in the mud a mile or so up from Rick's house, and we dragged Stalking Wolf down to see it, jabbering at him all the way down about it being the print of the Jersey Devil because it had claws and it was so huge.

The folklore of our childhood had been full of tales of the Jersey Devil. I always liked to talk to the old Pineys who had lived in the woods so long that there was no recollection in the family of having lived anywhere else. They had incredible stories about the huge, hairy creature that robbed graves and tore people limb from limb. The Jersey Devil was a real creature to me then, and I loved stories about him though I lived in absolute terror of ever running into him. One day I would meet the Jersey Devil face to face in a way I couldn't even conceive of when we dragged Stalking Wolf out to look at the track.

Stalking Wolf looked at the print and then went up a little way and looked some more. He stood looking around a while before he went over to some bushes near one of the tracks and peered in. Then he came back. We

waited breathlessly for confirmation that we had indeed discovered an authentic print of the Jersey Devil.

Stalking Wolf shook his head and said that it was a brown and white male dog about 65 pounds who was very excited because he had picked up the scent of the rabbits or the racoon. He told us about ten other things about the dog and then he told us everything it had done while around the swamp. Rick and I were beside ourselves shouting, "What rabbits?! What racoon?!" Exuberance was our one flaw as nature watchers. We would see one wondrous thing, and we would jump around celebrating it and chasing away the fifty other fantastic things we could have seen.

Stalking Wolf showed us the rabbit tracks and told us where the rabbit had gone and come back from and why. He showed us where the dog had picked up the scent and how his gait had changed. The tracks went up to the bush and then leapt away where the rabbit had scurried out of the swamp grass. He pointed out where the rabbit had run, drawing the dog away from where we were. He showed us where she had lost him finally, and where the dog had gone up the hill grumbling and following his nose.

Then he took us back to where we started and showed us the nest and the baby rabbits the mother had been distracting the dog from. We were astounded. "How did you know all that?" we kept asking him. Finally he told us about the tracks and showed us how to read them. We couldn't hear enough of whatever he wanted to tell us about it. At first he drew tracks for us, but then he made us draw them ourselves. Next, we went out and looked for tracks and drew them using different kinds of shading to give depth. When we could draw a track exactly, we started to draw partial tracks until we could tell them apart from only one or two faint lines.

With every track, Stalking Wolf would tell us about the animal that made it, the family it belonged to, and why its track was the way it was. Why the Indians walked like the fox with one foot in front of the other in a straight line. Why the groundhog with its broad chest could never make the in-line tracks of a fox. This did

not occur overnight, but over months and often years. Tracking became a preoccupation with us. We tracked everywhere we went. Whenever we watched anything, we always went back later and looked at its tracks to match them up and what we had seen the animal do.

Rick liked to track, and he was a good tracker, but tracking came to me with amazing ease. I worked at it, but it was always a joy to do. I never tired of it. Rick was into stalking and watching nature more than tracks themselves. I wanted to be able to do what Stalking Wolf had done, to be able to look at the tracks and recreate what happened as surely as if I was looking back in time.

It took a long time of constant effort to learn to do that. We tracked everywhere. On the two-lane macadam road that was the biggest highway short of the Parkway, there was a butcher store where the owner smoked his own meat. Rick and I used to go there and learn his techniques after we got involved in taxidermy, but we liked this place especially because it had a bare spot of soft ground near the doorway that never completely dried out. The sets of tracks put down there were endless.

We would sit off to the side and watch someone walk in, and then we would rush over and follow his tracks marking where he stopped or turned or tied his shoes. We would draw the print and mark it with comments like, "Limp from hurt foot, two weeks later," and "Fat men toe out."

When we had fixed the track and the person in our minds, we would smooth out the dirt and wait for the next person to come along. When a woman went storming in with a complaint and came back out mollified, the difference in her tracks was obvious when we ran over to look. The long wedging plumes of dirt in front of the pointed toes going in and the firm even stride with clearly defined prints coming back out could not have contrasted more.

It took us years before we could do it with great precision, but we were improving and we were weaving everything we learned into everything else we did. When

we watched the animals, we went over and tracked what we had just watched. When we walked back along our own trail, we following our incoming tracks and watched how much they had deteriorated. Sometimes we would stop at every change in the steady walking pace of the tracks and go over what we did at that point on the way in and why.

We intentionally made footprints when we came to a new kind of soil and put little sticks in them to measure their deterioration. We checked our past footprints every time we passed them to see what changes the weather and time had brought about in them. We would spend a whole day or so watching a track deteriorate, just putting a footprint in the ground and sitting there watching it dry out and go grain by grain into the oblivion of the wind. Sometimes we put sticks and string around the tracks to keep the animals off them, and watched the way they changed over a period of months.

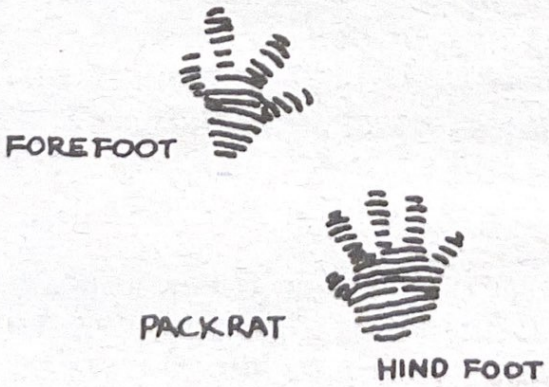
We did this over a period of years, track by track, in every kind of soil we could find, and in each soil we watched for a change in the tracks associated with every change in weather. When we were waiting for some creature to show itself, getting ourselves into position so we were part of the landscape for a long time before the creature came out of his burrow, we would make a print in the ground with a deer foot we carried with us and watch how it deteriorated over an hour or two.

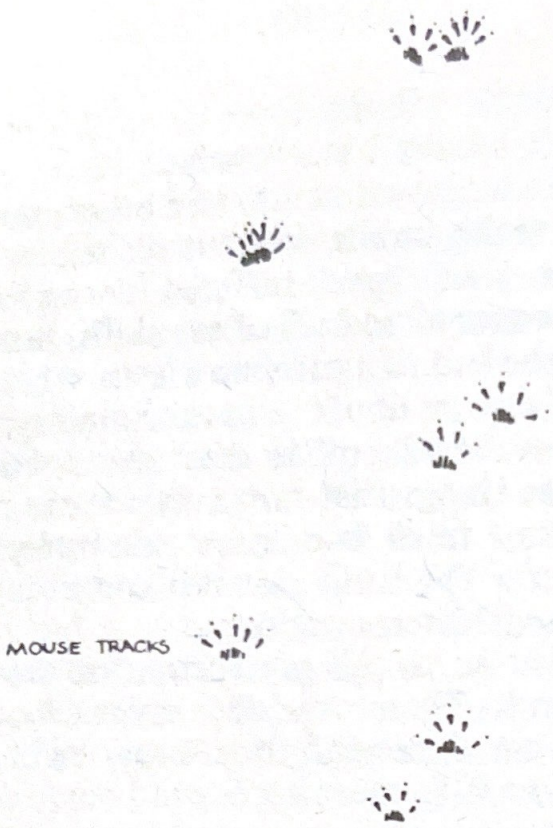
We put another print down near it every few minutes to see how much difference there was between the two and if they went through the same changes. We did that kind of thing constantly. Wherever we were, if there was nothing else worth watching, we watched the tracks change until we could see some of the minute variations that Stalking Wolf could see.

We learned to track and stalk, we learned to live in the wilderness and then learned to survive in it. We learned, by living, how to live. We became men and brothers in the woods. We came of age in the woods, and we came alive. Old Stalking Wolf guided us. This book is the story of how we did it and how I have applied what Stalking Wolf taught me.

Very little of this book will have to do with the criminal cases in which I have been involved because some of them are still under investigation and others involve details I cannot make public without disturbing the privacy of people who have suffered enough. Criminal tracking challenges almost all of my skills, but there is no joy in it. At the end of a case, no matter what decision is reached, there is doubt and uncertainty, anger and controversy. Much of it can never be resolved, and even those things that are certain have a way of deteriorating like a track in a heavy rain under the arguments of lawyers. The truth, when it comes in words, is always a matter of interpretation.

In this book, I have tried to tell my version of the truth and how I came to it. These words are my tracks, this book is my trail; I am at the end of it somewhere, looking for other tracks and the meaning beyond them.





2/Go and Ask the Mice

It amazes me, when I look back, how little of all that Stalking Wolf taught me was done in words, and how deftly everything was done. He never gave me a direct answer, and when he had something to teach us, he arranged it so that it was something we suddenly needed desperately to know.

He took us tracking one cold December day when the temperature changed, as it does in New Jersey, four or five times from freezing to above freezing in the same day. We made some tracks in the early morning ground and waited and watched as the temperature played havoc with their shape. "That was great!" we told Stalking Wolf when we were finished, but he shrugged a modest disagreement. When he spoke, his hand came up

as if it were the true speaker and made pictures to fill in where there were no words.

English is a bad language for certain kinds of words. It hasn't got much for ideas like *wholeness of feeling. Nature* is the best word English can come up with to describe something as various yet as indivisible as the bond between all living things. Most of what it feels like to *be there* in the woods is inexpressible in any language. The only language for some things is experience. Some experiences simply do not translate. You have to *go* to *know*.

Stalking Wolf's hand made pictures of experience for which there were no words in either Spanish or English, for concepts thought to be daydreams in New Jersey. There was no way for him to say to us that we should never so focus our attention that we were not also aware of the larger pattern around us.

Where our schools were forcing us to pay total attention, Stalking Wolf was teaching us intermittent attention, a constant refocusing between minute detail and the whole area around it, between the track and the whole pattern of the woods.

When we said what a great experience it had been to sit and watch the track deteriorate, Stalking Wolf said, "The racoon liked it. The squirrel disapproved. The rabbits shook their heads at it, and the deer had no feeling for it at all." His hand moved the animals in to look over our shoulders to see what we were staring at so intently that they could come up on us unnoticed like that. The fingers shrugged and went away again like the animals had while we sat staring at the track.

Rick and I groaned at all we had missed again. "You do not look," Stalking Wolf said as if he were laughing at us.

"But we had to see the track," I said, "You told us to watch the track."

He tried not to laugh. "How do you eat a deer?" he said. His hands made a shape much bigger than his mouth. His eyes did what they always did. They looked at me and then looked away. They came back to my eyes

again like a beacon focusing its light in my direction on *every* revolution, but for only part of the time. When he listened he seemed to be listening to a totally different conversation with his other ear. I had thought that that motion was only an idiosyncrasy of the body, a tic from being old perhaps, but it was how he took in all those things that we did not.

"In little pieces," I said. It seemed so obvious looking backward from the answer. It was a long time before I could judge the rate of change in a track or something else I was watching so that I knew just how much time I could spend on each thing and still catch the subtle changes. Stalking Wolf always knew what was going on. If you spoke in a room where he was sleeping, he knew everything that was said.

When he taught us stalking, we had to sneak up on him. But we were never able to do it. He would turn before we got close enough to touch him and tell us exactly how we had come up behind him, where we had brushed against a tree, and where we had stepped on a twig. And he was always right. If we spent three hours sneaking up on him, he was aware of us for at least two of them.

He knew exactly how much of his attention he had to devote to each thing to measure it and to keep the vision of the whole pattern going at the same time so he could see the disturbances. Because he knew the daily pattern of life in the forest, he knew what was normal for the weather and the time of day. He knew how much bird activity there should be, which shift of predators was around, when the mice would be running from place to place. But he had to keep an ongoing record of it in his mind.

He had an incredible memory for detail, as if he took the whole scene in instead of focusing on one part of it as most people do. He could recall every detail because he knew the experience as a whole. Everything fitted in with the ongoing pattern of the weather he kept in his head. I believe he slept with his window open so that the record could be kept even while he was asleep, although

I do not believe that he was totally asleep for very long at any one time.

Maybe he had figured out how much of his brain he could afford to rest at any one time and for how much time he would have to shut it down altogether for recuperation. He always seemed to know what was happening all around him, as if he had ears and eyes all over his body.

Once while we were walking in the woods, Rick was looking around and twisting his head up toward the branches and down onto the path as a way of scanning things. I believe the fact that he moved his head so much instead of moving his eyes had a lot to do with why he was not as good a tracker as he might have been. We went under a tree while Rick was looking up and Stalking Wolf said, "Let it sleep."

He kept walking but we begged him to tell us *what* was sleeping. He nodded at a Great Horned Owl on a branch above our heads. I was sure he had not looked up as we had approached the tree, or as we passed under it, but I gradually came to realize that he did not need to *see* it to know it would be there. He knew the way owls lived; he knew what kind of trees they liked; he had seen the fresh owl pellets on the ground at the base of the tree; he knew when owls flew and when they rested. He knew the activity of small rodents for the time of day and temperature. He could probably have told us what tree the owl would be in if he had stayed at home.

We pleaded with him to tell us how he knew, and he said that the mice had told him. When we wanted to know *what* the mice had told him, he said to go and ask the mice. So Rick and I spent the next couple of weeks studying mice. Thereafter we watched them to see what they were doing at that time of year, and we found that Stalking Wolf was right. Once we knew the pattern of life for the mice, we knew the pattern of life for everything that eats mice, and we could generalize to most other small rodents until we had a chance to study them the same way.

We also knew to some extent the lives of the things-